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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 KABUL 002190

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [ASEC](#) [MARR](#) [AF](#)

SUBJECT: PRT KHOST: KHOST PROVINCE SIX MONTH ASSESSMENT

Classified By: PolCouns Sara Rosenberry for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Khost Province, located on the eastern-most edge of Afghanistan, remains vulnerable to extremist activity due to its close proximity to the Waziristan region of Pakistan. Attack levels have risen in recent months, directed at Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and Coalition Forces (CF). Nevertheless, most residents characterize the overall situation as progressing slowly toward increased stability. IED activity has increased, but suicide attacks have decreased dramatically. Provincial security officials exhibit effective leadership and coordinate with each other and CF. Governor Arsal Jamal has grown as a political leader. Increased PRT development projects focused on outlying mountainous districts has been well-received by residents. Afghan officials press for U.S. action to overcome construction delays on the Khost-Gardez road and seek a U.S. proposal on how best to reestablish airport service. Advances among women remain stymied as residents, especially in rural areas, cling to traditional Pashtun tribal views. END SUMMARY

SECURITY

2. (C) The proximity of Khost Province to Pakistan -- it shares a 200 kilometer long border -- represents the single largest influence on overall security. Coalition Forces, the Afghan National Army, and Afghan Border Police have increased patrols at the ten border checkpoints, sites of regular low-level attacks. Districts adjacent to Pakistan represent the highest-risk areas for both CF and ANSF patrols. The cross-border transit of anti-coalition militants (ACM) and suicide bombers highlights ongoing concerns about the porous eastern edge of the province. Tribes in three districts (Sebari, Nadir Shah Kot, Spera) remain non-cooperative in local security matters, likely reflecting longstanding ties to pro-ACM, ex-mujahadin leaders in those areas.

3. (C) Coordination is strong among ANSF leaders (army, police, NDS) and CF. Governor Jamal hosts weekly security

meetings with active participation, though he has expressed concerns about the strength of Khost's police chief (BGen Ayoub). Security Shuras are regularly convened in the most troubled areas. District elders predictably link improved security to the availability of new assistance and development projects. Recruitment for ANSF does not pose a key challenge, although most locally recruited soldiers and police question why "danger pay" is not offered for service in one of the country's more volatile areas. Past salary problems (late payments) have been largely resolved for regular police; auxiliary police, however, represent a more mixed picture, in terms of both performance and pay.

¶4. (C) Madrasses constitute a key area of concern for provincial leaders. Khost's police chief recently stated that "99 percent of the province's problems" are tied to extremist elements active in provincial and Pakistani madrasses. Governor Jamal plans to more actively engage area mullahs, including funding mosque repairs. One proposal, so far raised only informally, would establish "magnet madrasses" in Khost -- GOA-funded (construction and mullahs' salaries) and tied to more balanced curricula.

POLITICAL

¶5. (C) Governor Jamal, who has served as Khost's governor since summer 2006, has recently shown more initiative in reaching out across political constituencies and geographically to remote districts. President Karzai had previously expressed to PRT privately his reservations about the Governor's leadership abilities, despite Jamal's strong management skills. Today, President Karzai and GOA ministers

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compliment the Governor for his active role in Khost, to include regular appearances in the media marking opening ceremonies for various projects (largely PRT-funded). During the Governor's visit to Kabul in late June 2007, Karzai reportedly commented that Khost had seen the most rebuilding activity of any province, a credit, he said, to Jamal and his work with the PRT.

¶6. (C) Other political leaders in Khost vary in effectiveness and closeness to residents. The Provincial Council members hold diverse political views and include three women. Governor Jamal works well with the elected body. Parliamentarians from Khost have occasionally used public speeches to criticize what they consider to be inadequate resources and central government corruption in Kabul.

¶7. (C) Governor Jamal seeks U.S. support for several key political priorities, including elevating Khost's classification by the GOA to a Level I province (from Level III), speeding up U.S.-funded roadwork for the Khost-Gardez road (the principal link to the capital), and interaction with the Ministry of Defense leadership in Kabul over disputed land issues (parcels for residents to build homes, promises so far unmet).

¶8. (C) Broader provincial outreach efforts have gained traction in 2007 with the establishment of district centers throughout Khost. Construction has been completed on six buildings, with remaining centers expected to be completed by the end of the year. Village elders and mullahs have agreed to provide security at the sites, including in the region's mountainous areas. They have welcomed these visible symbols of the government's commitment to a more sustained presence.

ECONOMIC

¶9. (C) Khost is a largely agrarian economy with minimal industry. Its capital city contains an untapped investor pool, particularly regarding planned housing projects, but

security concerns (more perceived than real) have inhibited such developments. The province is largely dependent on Pakistan for most of its products and skilled labor (brick making, steel, engineers, for example). Items in local markets are commonly priced in rupees. The sizable population of returnees to Khost from Pakistan has resulted in increased economic pressures. Unemployment rates are high (now estimated at 20 percent) with a large proportion of younger workers employed in Gulf countries (in the UAE alone, 30,000-40,000 are engaged in manual labor jobs). Dubai-based investors have recently funded a new university campus and a central mosque. UAE investors represent an investment source that has become a priority for provincial officials.

¶10. (C) The lack of basic road infrastructure and electricity continues to stifle basic economic development. In addition to the K-G Road project, transit between central Khost and outlying areas remains challenging, especially in winter months. Local officials have urged that Pakistan power be imported into the province as a temporary bridge measure; they cite northern Afghanistan's electricity arrangements with Tajikistan as a model. Ongoing political sensitivities between Kabul and Islamabad have reportedly complicated these plans.

¶11. (C) Deforestation of Khost's mountains represents a key environmental challenge. The government has so far failed to stem the logging of forests -- an estimated 6,000 trees per day are cut for lumber, much of which is then exported to Pakistan. Residents acknowledge the long-term damage being done but complain that few other income opportunities exist, particularly in isolated mountain communities.

CULTURAL/SOCIAL

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¶12. (C) Khost's native Pashtun culture and tribal traditions dominate the province's cultural and social interactions. While the value of education is increasingly recognized across Khost, most resources remain directed toward boys. A majority of girls stop attending school by their early teen-aged years. Currently, there is only one female high school. Recent school projects have been designed to bridge this gap by seeking village support for the construction of new girls' schools alongside those of boys.

¶13. (C) The split between Khost city and the mountainous districts reflects a longstanding tension. Khost's prior status as "Little Moscow" during the Soviet occupation has resulted in ongoing social and professional friction between ex-communists and others who led mujahadin attacks against the Russians. Past infrastructure projects overwhelmingly built in urban areas -- to include some development projects initiated by the Taliban -- deepened this divide.

¶14. (C) Longstanding tribal traditions form the basis for relations throughout Khost. Rule of law concepts have not taken root outside urbanized areas. Blood feud disputes -- primarily over land -- are most often settled without involvement by state institutions.

¶15. (C) Khost benefits from an active local media scene. One television and three radio stations operate in the province, in addition to popular feeds from Kabul-based stations. One weekly newspaper and more than 15 other publications (religious, political, most cultural/literature) are published in the province. Khost media widely cover new projects and opening ceremonies in broadcasts and in print. Governor Jamal has also encouraged frank on-the-record exchanges with reporters.

WOOD